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ELECTIVES IN THE SMALL HIGH SCHOOL

FREEDOM for the individual seems to be the central thought in the arguments advanced in favor of electives in the high school. It is well to remember that the granting of absolute freedom to all produces a condition of limited freedom for each. The very fact that others have been granted freedom will limit the activity of each to those things which do not interfere with the rights and privileges of any other. In this, a free country, we may each do as we please, except when that action is dangerous to others or hostile to the general good. A man may not harm his neighbor without feeling the majesty of the law. Neither can he destroy his own property nor take his own life without an effort being made to prevent it. It is deemed harmful to the public good to allow a man to commit suicide, and in educational matters the same principle holds good.

There are two interests to consider, those of the individual and those of the community or state. In this, a republic, the proper education of the people is essential to the best development of the national life. Every man who falls short of the best possible education lowers by so much the national vitality. I do not mean by this that if all men were Ph.D.'s we would have a better republic. Far from it. But I do mean that every boy should have that amount of education which will best fit him for his station in life; and that he shall have enough to enable him to choose that station intelligently, with as full a knowledge as possible of his own abilities, his own likes and dislikes, his chances of failure or success in the chosen line.

The good of the community demands that no one be allowed to commit intellectual suicide. Your rights and mine collectively are superior to the rights of any particular individual. This principle may be applied both for and against the elective system. If the forcing of a boy through, or rather over, a prescribed course, stunts his intellectual growth, ruins his mental capacity, kills his interest in school, and drives him out less

fitted for his work than he might otherwise have been, then by all means let us avoid the prescribed course. If, on the other hand, a system (or rather lack of system) of free electives permits such a selection of work that the boy leaves school without acquiring habits of accuracy; if dormant powers have not been awakened; if he has not learned the lesson of patient persistent work (call it drudgery if you will); if he leaves thinking that all work is a mere following of a desire, then the school has failed to do what it might have done for this boy, and both the boy and the community suffer.

Fortunately neither of these two results very often follow. The prescribed course in most cases neither stunts the boy's intellectual growth nor kills his interest in school. Likewise it has been demonstrated that under an absolutely free elective system most of the pupils select a well-balanced course of study. The real question at issue, then, is limited to those few who cannot do the prescribed course, and to those few who will not select a systematic course under a system of free electives.

The remedy for the first does not lie in the removing of all restrictions. If the collar galls the horse's shoulder we do not throw away the entire harness. So in a program of studies, I believe that much should be preserved and insisted upon, and that the adjustments necessary will be found few in number.

The second class, those who under a free elective system make the wrong selections, would, in my opinion, suffer no harm if compelled to *try* some things. I have taught pupils who seemed beyond hope in geometry, and yet I believe that the very effort made by these pupils to master a bit of logical thought was of inestimable value to them, even though they never obtained a passing mark. If these pupils were good in their other studies they derived no great harm from this so-called waste of their time, and if they were not good in anything they ought not to lay claim to the honors of graduation. In practice I have graduated pupils who had not passed geometry, but never one who had not tried to pass it.

The whole question hinges on what subjects are essential and who is the best judge. Recently a prominent advocate of free

electives, a man who has spent many years in high-school work, said to me that he was not competent to select the subjects which were essential, that he was biased. If such a man, who knows the contents of the different subjects, and who knows, or ought to know, the educational value of each — if he cannot tell which subjects are well adapted to general educational needs, how much less is the fifteen-year-old boy or girl able to select wisely? The man or woman who has spent ten years with high school boys and girls, and who cannot in nine cases out of ten make a better selection of subjects for a boy than the boy or his mother can, lacks all of the essential elements of a good high-school principal. The man who can do this can also with equal facility tell when the boy has been sent the wrong way, and will make all wise and needful concessions. We hear a great deal about the elective system's allowing the administration to get an arm around the boy. This is good, but what the boy wants is a strong, vigorous, guiding arm which is at the same time sympathetic and encouraging, not one which assists him to his own ruin.

If there is a conflict, real or apparent, between the interests of the individual and that of the community, the community interests must rule, and in general this is best served by a program of studies containing at least some semblance of a systematic and orderly arrangement of subjects deemed most essential.

Let us consider what are the essential subjects. In a recent article in the *Popular Science Monthly*, Professor Hanus says:

The question about elective studies is, accordingly, not "shall we recognize electives?" That question has been answered in the affirmative. The question is, "What is the wisest administration of electives in secondary education?" While each school is seeking the answer to this question in its own way there is a substantial agreement on one point, namely, that there should be restriction on the pupil's freedom to choose his own curriculum of studies.

In defining this restriction Professor Hanus further says:

Under existing conditions . . . it seems to me wise to prescribe for every high-school pupil at least one year of the language and literature of his mother tongue; one year of American or English history (chiefly political); one year of American or English economical history and civics, or,

when possible one year of elementary political economy; one year of a modern foreign language; one year of science (physical geography or botany and zoölogy); one year of algebra and geometry together; one year of drawing and manual training; each of these subjects with a time allotment of from three to four periods per week.

Whether this amount of prescribed work is a "safe basis for the administration of the elective system in our secondary schools" depends on the conditions existing in such schools. It is my belief that the *conditions actually existing* in the smaller high schools, by which I mean those with less than four teachers, differ so materially from the conditions in the larger high schools, which Professor Hanus evidently had in mind, that a considerable modification of his prescribed list should be made.

Many of the schools have during the last decade put into operation programs requiring less than five recitations per week in a subject. The desire to reduce the number of recitations per pupil below twenty per week, and the belief that fifteen was too small a number, was one of the reasons for the movement. Another lay in the belief that better results would be obtained by spreading a given number of recitations over longer time. In the larger high schools working under high pressure the first of these reasons *may* have much weight, but in most of the smaller schools the average pupils are not overburdened by twenty recitations per week. A diminution of the number would in most cases result in direct loss, because no corresponding increase in the intensity of work would be made. As to the second reason, experience has shown that in most cases the pupils suffer a loss in interest and do less effective work when recitations are separated by intervening days. It is the almost unanimous reply of teachers who have tried it, and I have asked many, that pupils reciting but three times a week do less than three fifths as much as would be done in five recitations per week. As a result of this experience very few of the smaller high schools in Illinois now offer fractional courses. As applied to small schools, therefore, the time allotment should be not less than five recitations per week in each subject.

A second existing condition which will modify the prescribed

list is the positive refusal of many school boards to approve of a curriculum making a foreign language a requisite of graduation. I attach such value to the study of foreign language that I would welcome a requirement of at least two years work in some one of them, but in a large share of the smaller schools any language *requirement* is out of the question.

Still a third modifying condition lies in the quality of the work done in English. Even under the best conditions a year of English work is insufficient. English is such a practical asset and is so essential to the best development and the future welfare of the pupil that it cannot be slighted. There is so much of English that is essential that no non-essential English should be taught. Every pupil, therefore, should not only be allowed to take all of the English taught, but should be compelled to take it. There are differences of ability but for most pupils an irreducible minimum is three years of five full recitations per week. Except under most favorable conditions a fourth year may profitably be added. It is also understood that the English is not to be a "snap," but that the teacher is to demand full time of preparation, and place the work on a level with that in other lines.

Again, if algebra and geometry are to be taught together, one year is insufficient, and if but one is taught many teachers would not willingly omit the other from the required list. So long as schools insist on teaching ancient and mediæval arithmetic in the seventh and eighth grades when algebra and elementary geometry might more profitably be taught, two years of high-school work in mathematics will be a requirement not inconsistent with the welfare of the pupil.

Making these modifications, and some minor ones, the required list might be made up as follows: English four years, algebra and plane geometry two years, English and United States history one year, physics one year. This covers one half the entire work. It can be conveniently arranged so as to provide two subjects for each year of the course. If the pupil is to recite in four subjects daily, at least three additional subjects must be offered in each year in order to provide any chance

for election. This would add twelve subjects to the curriculum and bring the total number of daily recitations up to twenty. There is a substantial agreement among educators that forty minutes is the minimum recitation period consistent with effective high-school work. On this basis it is possible to provide eight periods per day, though it is usual to provide but seven. In order to hear twenty recitations daily in a school of three teachers each assistant would need to teach seven classes, while the superintendent taught six. This is a number too large for the best work, and even this makes no provision for double laboratory periods. A slight reduction in the number of recitations may be brought about by alternation of third and fourth year subjects.

It may be of advantage to have such a course in full before us. The selection of the electives would be guided by local conditions, the bias of the teacher, and the traditions of the school. They might not be those given below. These were selected because they conform closely to present practice in Illinois.

FIRST YEAR	
Required	Elective
English I.	Latin I.
Algebra.	Physical Geog. $\frac{1}{2}$; Physiology $\frac{1}{2}$.
	Bookkeeping.
SECOND YEAR	
English II.	Latin II.
Plane Geometry.	Zoölogy $\frac{1}{2}$; Botany $\frac{1}{2}$.
	Greek and Roman History.
THIRD YEAR	
English III.	Latin III.
Physics.	Mediæval and Modern History (German I).
	Solid Geometry and Algebra.
FOURTH YEAR	
English IV.	Latin IV.
English and United States History.	Political Economy and Civics.
	Chemistry (German II).

If but three years of English are required, an additional year of history or economics may be added to the required list.

Drawing or manual training, however desirable, cannot be required in this class of schools. In fact, on account of lack of suitably prepared teachers, they cannot be advantageously taught in most of them. It will be observed that the substitution of German for history in the third year and for chemistry in the fourth year provides a course which requires at least two years of foreign language for graduation. In the elective list the subjects may vary widely or their relative positions may be changed. This in turn might necessitate a rearrangement of the required subjects. The essential points, however, are that at least the amount given should be required and that a three-teacher high school cannot offer more than twelve additional subjects. Where local conditions permit the requiring of two years of foreign language, it will be of advantage to reduce the total number of subjects to eighteen, thus making all subjects required during two years of the course. Pupils preparing for college will need to select foreign language and the third year of mathematics. The exigencies of daily program-making will make it advisable to restrict the choosing of electives to those offered in the year of the course which the pupil has reached, except that pupils who have omitted Latin may be allowed to begin it in the third year.

On the basis of forty-minute recitations the maximum number which can be taught in a two-teacher school is sixteen. It is evident that no elective studies can be offered if the curriculum provides for four studies daily for four years. By alternation of third and fourth year subjects the number of daily recitations may be reduced to fourteen. Many such schools desire to offer Latin, but are compelled by local sentiment to allow the pupil to take something in its stead. Such schools frequently present a curriculum requiring twenty daily recitations, an amount of work evidently too great. In this case perhaps the best that can be done is to offer a four-year course of three studies daily. The optional studies instead of Latin would bring the total number of subjects offered up to sixteen, while the daily recitations might be reduced to fourteen by alternation. In such a school the bright pupils could take four studies daily, while the others took but three.

The consideration of existing conditions, as I see them, leads me to the conclusion that whatever our desires and beliefs in regard to electives may be, the pupil in a two-teacher school cannot avail himself of much choice other than that of omission. In a three-teacher school a limited elective system similar to the one outlined may be put into operation without subordinating the general good to that of the individual, and represents all that is possible or even desirable.

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